

THE POLITICS OF ACCESSING LEADERSHIP: THE
NIGERIAN CONTEXT

DELIVERED



BY

HONOURABLE MULIKAT AKANDE- ADEOLA, OFR

LEADER, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY COMPLEX, THREE ARMS ZONE, ABUJA

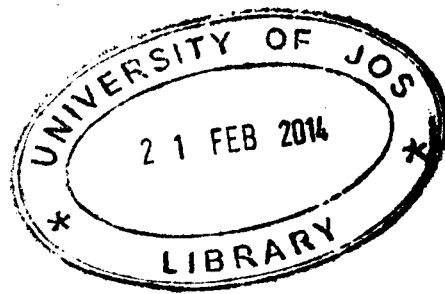
A DISTINGUISHED ANNUAL GUEST LECTURE

2013 SERIES

UNIVERSITY OF JOS, JOS

11th February 2013





Introduction

The fundamental underlying motivation behind men aggregating into communities is to foster mutually beneficial social relationships through frequent interaction. Interaction is therefore, an inevitability of human beings sharing common territorial space. As people interact in the society, disagreement or misunderstanding often expresses itself and depending on how they construct responses to it, it could be effectively managed or snowball into violent conflict. More often than not, disagreements among members of the political class degenerate into violent conflict, with catastrophic consequences.

Given the immense propensity of human society for conflicts of varying forms, it becomes a compelling necessity to put in place a leadership structure that will regulate the conduct and behaviour of citizens in the community. This consideration is predicated on the fact that human nature is essentially egoistic and if not effectively managed, could work to undermine the foundation of a stable social and political order. Leadership is therefore a critical requirement in preserving and promoting the integrity and cohesion of the political community. Leadership is used here to refer to a carefully and purposively constructed structure to regulate the affairs of citizens in the society with a view to establishing a stable, progressive and dynamic social order. Leadership could be political, bureaucratic or traditional in form. The stability and cohesion of any society is inconceivable without an effective leadership to shape the policy direction of that society.

It is against the background of the preceding introductory remarks that the paper examines the politics of **accessing leadership in the Nigerian context**. The overriding objective of the paper is to critically analyze the politics of ascension to leadership position in Nigeria. As we have stated in the foregoing preamble, the egoistic nature of mankind makes competition over scarce but distributable resources inevitable. Hardly does somebody believe that his or her interest could be better protected and promoted by somebody else than himself or herself. The implication of this belief is that ascension to leadership position is intensely competitive, especially in the Nigerian context where many people believe that leadership unlocks the door to incredible affluence. In a sense, the paper seeks to evaluate the nature and character of politics in Nigeria as it relates to the struggle to capture and retain political leadership by the diverse groups in Nigeria. We will prescribe some feasible measures to provide remedies to some observed pathologies for a more decent, progressive and fair politics of accessing leadership in Nigeria.

The Context

Nigeria's attainment of independence on 1st October 1960 was greeted with widespread outpouring of excitement and relief from the excruciating colonial rule foisted on her by the British. The brutal, illegitimate and authoritarian British colonial rule negated the popular expectations of Nigerians for a free and fulfilled socio-economic and political existence. The colonial state constructed by the British was not only insensitive and unresponsive to the aspirations and expectations of the colonized people but also dehumanized them through forced labour, discriminatory practices and a host of other degrading treatments meted out

to Nigerians. A confluence of all these engendered the anti colonial agitations targeted at subverting the despotic and capricious British colonial rule.

The anti-colonial struggle gained popular support among the colonized people because of the intense feelings of denial, exclusion, developmental neglect and the conscious policy of the colonial state to deconstruct the colonized society along ethno-religious line into incompatible enclaves ostensibly to undercut the emergence of anti-colonial sentiments, an imposition of divide and rule system of governance. The splitting of Nigeria into three regions (Western, Northern and Eastern regions) was a deliberate strategy of fostering regional consciousness expected to pitch the regions against one another so as to keep them perpetually divided and to set the tone for inter regional animosity. However, in spite of all these, Nigerians remained resolute, focused and determined in waging anti-colonial struggle expected to fast track the process of attaining independence.

The anti-colonial struggle paid off with Nigeria becoming a sovereign and independent state on October 1, 1960. This development fueled the expectations and aspirations of Nigerians, especially the ordinary Nigerians for enhanced social, economic and political well being. Having successfully displaced and supplanted the British colonialists, the indigenous leaders soon realized the enormity of people's expectations and the challenge of building a nation out of the disparate cultural collectivities wielded together by the colonial state. It was in an attempt to respond to this challenge of nation building that the leadership question became obvious.

Building a stable and dynamic political system with considerable strength to accommodate strains and stresses became an arduous task before the first crop of the indigenous leaders. The weak spirit of tolerance, accommodation, give and

take, which characterized the anti- colonial struggle, melted away thereby giving rise to the emergence of dangerous parochial orientations. Accordingly, the nation building project was progressively de-emphasized in favour of regional concerns by the indigenous leaders (Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sir Tafawa Balewa, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, etc.).

There is, in a fundamental sense, the fractionalization of political elites along ethnic, religious and regional lines (Osaghae, 2011; Ihonvbere, 2000) which weakened attachment to the national project. Each of the aforementioned leaders was deeply engrossed in the enterprise of modernizing his region as a means of consolidating power base in a competitive multi-ethnic developing federation. Consequently, centrifugal forces took the centre stage and generated a multitude of crises which conspired to cause the collapse of the first republic in 1966. In a deeply divided society such as Nigeria with no clearly articulated unifying ideology, centrifugal forces would predominate and deepen fault lines with implications for the corporate survival of the society.

Developments in the first republic that cumulatively led to the fall of the first republic include the unhealthy rivalry that characterized the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) coalition in the immediate post independence period. The NPC-NCNC coalition was widely believed to be a loose one, especially against the backdrop of the fact that it was constructed to keep the Action Group (AG) perpetually in weak opposition, create mutual suspicion and mistrust between the two regionally based parties fast tracked the deconstruction of the coalition. This indeed, marked the fragmentation of political leadership in Nigeria and the attendant instability.

Fragmentation of political leadership in a plural political community often robs the system of the much needed cohesion and shared vision that should help the leadership in charting a progressive path for the society. The inevitable consequence of fragmenting political leadership is widespread debilitating competition and intense struggle for supremacy.

This tendency is still very pronounced in Nigeria's politics and this is at the core of frequent hiccups in the country's political process. Issues of post-election violence, rigging, use of thugs during election and a host of others are all fragments of evidence in support of the fact that competition for political power has not only become so intense but also very deadly and this in substantial part, is attributed to the fragmented nature of the ruling elite (Albert, 2012).

The how and why of Accessing Leadership in Nigeria

The leadership question in a dependent neo-colonial economy is very critical to the evolution of a stable, dynamic, progressive and enduring socio-political order. Accessing leadership in the Nigerian political context is as engaging as utilizing it to meet the developmental aspirations of Nigerians. One key point that must be noted in discussing the politics of accessing leadership in Nigeria is the means or how question and the end or why question. Put more explicitly, how do the elites access political leadership in Nigeria and why do they aspire to lead? Many Nigerian elites have developed various strategies to access leadership position.

We will however, precede our consideration of these various strategies by looking at the various levels of leadership in both its formal and informal sense.

Broadly speaking, leadership in Nigeria could be viewed from two perspectives. One is the constitutional perspective and the other one is the unconstitutional perspective. The constitutional perspective in the context of this discourse refers to all those positions that are embodied in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. These include political and bureaucratic offices to be filled either through election or appointment as the case may be. For instance, the offices of the President, state Governor, Local Government Chairman, Senate, House of Representatives, state house of assembly, local government council and a host of others are good examples of political offices expected at all times to be filled through election. The holders or occupants of these offices are elected periodically for fixed tenure and subject to renewal for another term in the case of executive offices and for unlimited tenure for the legislative arm of government.

Another set of political leaders are Ministers, Commissioners, Supervisory Councilors, heads of Boards and parastatals, etc These are leaders appointed to provide political direction for their respective establishments.. Bureaucratic offices are those filled through appointment such as Permanent Secretaries, Head of Service, Directors, civil and public servants and a host of others.

While all the foregoing represent constitutionally prescribed offices, unconstitutional leaders are leadership positions not provided for in the constitution. Heads of private establishments, traditional institutions, religious and ethnic organizations, etc. are not constitutionally prescribed leadership positions. Generally, one can assert that every Nigerian is a leader in his or her own right in the sense that you decide how to spend your time and resources; you decide the size of your family, the welfare of the family, etc.

However, our discourse is limited to formal leadership positions. In other words, we are only concerned with political leadership in the formal sector that is expected to serve as a compass in terms of providing policy direction for all citizens and to promote their welfare at all times. A leader in the context of our discourse is therefore one who is either elected or appointed within the formal setting with the mandate to expand the frontiers of the welfare of Nigerians either through the enterprise of law making or the implementation of those laws validly made by the competent organ of government . All those who occupy leadership positions in the executive, the legislature and the judiciary play complementary role in promoting the welfare of Nigerians.

As we have underscored the point earlier, leadership in Nigeria could be accessed in two ways. One way of accessing leadership is through election which involves choosing out of several alternatives by the electorate to occupy some elective political offices. This process is expected to provide the best for the society because of the established belief that collective wisdom of the people often yields the best. However, this is not always the case in Nigeria because other considerations interfere with the process which may compromise the integrity of the process. For instance, one vehicle through which leaders are produced is political party which serves as a platform for citizens aspiring to lead to contest for election.

Election in Nigeria as we all know is not a foolproof mechanism for the production of leaders into political offices. From the beginning of the process to the end, it is prone to manipulations towards producing a predetermined outcome. Once as a candidate you do not belong to the right camp or show sufficient willingness to be subservient to the power that be, you may have your dream

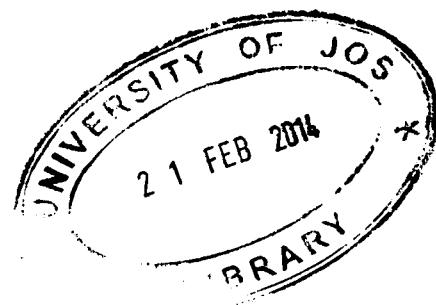
truncated. This is what is widely referred to as the institution of 'political Godfather' in Nigerian politics.

As a political Godson or daughter, you are expected to be uncritically subservient to the God father if you want to avoid his or her wrath. The Godfather uses his immense resources and influence to make you win an election but at a considerable cost to the Godson. Leadership through this means may not be effective in the sense that the legitimacy profile of the leader may be too low as to command the habitual obedience of the citizens and this could rob the leader of both tangible and intangible support.

More often than not, because of the desperation by politicians to access leadership position, moral considerations in the process are thrown to the dogs, while instrumental rationality takes the order of the day. In other words, the Machiavellian principle of the 'ends justifying the means' becomes the guiding principle in the desperate appetite for leadership position by political actors within the polity. The legitimate mandate of a popular candidate who is not attached to any known Godfather can easily be stolen with impunity.

Access by Women to Political Leadership in Nigeria

It is instructive to note that electoral politics in Nigeria as a critical means of accessing leadership is more often than not, disadvantageous to the bulk of the women folk who are considerably skilled and effective to vie for leadership positions in the Nigerian society. The process is deliberately designed in such a way as to make it an uphill task for women politicians to compete favourably with their men counterparts for leadership positions. For instance, political meetings are scheduled for ungodly hours to exclude as many women politicians as possible.



Women who are daring enough to attend such political meetings at odd times are called some derogatory names just to impugn their integrity.

As a result of this, many women who have the determination to lead feel discouraged for fear of being called some derogatory names by their male counterparts who may feel intimidated by the political skill and competence of such women opponents. There is therefore, considerable sense in which one can contend with vehemence that the Nigerian electoral politics is designed to favour the male folk to the detriment of the women folk. This clearly accounts for why since Nigeria became independent in October 1960, there has been, for instance, no woman Governor in any part of the country.

All we see year in year out are women as Deputy Governors and who have long been consigned to the status of spare-tyres which is only needed when the main tyre has gone flat. We consider this arrangement as mere tokenism and symbolism rather than genuine and sustained commitment to empower women politically. Most of these women Deputy Governors have been undeservedly ill treated by their male bosses who felt threatened by their rising popularity rating profile. If you meet these Deputy Governor, they will be able to tell you a lot about their experiences.

This is obviously a negation of the understanding that in a democracy, there has to be a variety of access points to all competing groups and interests in a plural society as a mechanism for promoting inclusiveness and participation in the mainstream socio-political and economic processes (Heywood, 2007).

There can be no doubt that maintaining democratic stability in Nigeria implies widening access points to leadership to all interest groups in Nigeria so as

to cultivate in them a robust sense of inclusion and belonging in the affairs of the society.

The inability of the Nigerian state to achieve in concrete terms the national aspirations as embodied in the Second National Development Plan is largely accounted for by deliberate policy of exclusion of the vast majority of Nigerians by a clique. A tiny of the political class has, in an unpatriotic sense, used political power to pursue private ends at the expense of public goods thereby engendering a huge disconnect between the government and the citizenry (ihonvberé, 1996; Diamond, 1988; Joseph, 2007). This is arguably, a fall out of the jaundiced notion of politics upheld by members of the political class. Many of them view politics in instrumental terms (Elaigwu, 2000) and this obviously shapes their attitude towards the political system.

The implication of this perverse notion of politics for effort at transforming the political system is that there is lack of sincerity of purpose on the part of those who are benefiting from the existing social order to seek to change it in a way that would promote collective as opposed to personal ends. .

The national aspirations which include building a united, strong and self-reliant nation; a great and dynamic economy; a just and egalitarian society; a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens; and a free and democratic society have remained elusive on account of lack of broad access to leadership.

As a critical group in Nigerian politics, women have remained largely excluded from key leadership positions. Consequently, the country is robbed of the wisdom and productive potentials of this group, especially in the sphere of public policy making and implementation.

Accordingly, fair opportunities must be created for all interest groups such as the youth, women, the physically challenged and the elderly citizens to articulate their perspectives on national issues through good representation in all critical centers of decision making. In a sense, the needs and interests of all these groups must be factored into the framing of national developmental agenda.

In Nigeria, it is not uncommon to find some ethno-regional platforms such as the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), The Yoruba Elders' Forum (YEF), the Ohaneze Ndigbo (ON), the South South People's Assembly (SSPA), the Middle Belt Forum (MBF) and a host of others agitating for leadership positions within the Nigerian federation. These informal structures have emerged as parts of the pull and push forces of Nigerian politics. As Osaghae (2005: vii) (has aptly noted, these ethnic nationalities and pan regional groupings are more fundamental to the federal bargain than the states as federating units. The pan regional platforms are used to draw attention to regional imbalance in appointments at the federal level. They have in effect, come to replace the constitutionally recognized states as the genuine federating units in the context of Nigeria's federal structure.

In some cases, pan religious organizations such as the Christians Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Jamatul Nasril Islam (JNI) have been mobilized and used for federal bargain. Politicians have found these informal platforms more effective in accessing leadership position at the federal level.

One very important point that must be stressed in discussing the how of accessing leadership in Nigeria is the growing demand for the multiplication of state structure to provide accommodation for leadership seekers who have come to the conclusion that the existing political space is not commodious enough to help

them realize their deepest aspirations. The seeming unending demand for the creation of more states in Nigeria can only be comprehended in this context.

The agitation for the creation of more states is not genuinely driven by the desire to meet the developmental aspirations of the citizenry but to create access to leadership positions. Quite recently, the National Assembly was inundated with wide ranging demands for the creation of more states by some interest groups. A critical and rational mind is compelled to ask the question, is creation of more states an effective response to the crisis of development in Nigeria?

The response to this question may vary but one key point is that it is more of a strategy of creating access to leadership positions than genuine search for response to the multitude of challenges of development in Nigeria. Creation of more states means more ministers at the federal level, more Governors, more ambassadorial appointments, more permanent secretaries at state and federal levels, etc. The Nigerian political class should appreciate the bitter fact that genuine development does not necessarily involve mobilizing primordial sentiments to support creation of more states but in the rational and prudent utilization of scarce resources to improve on the socio-economic and political well being of the citizenry.

With respect to the why question for seeking leadership position in Nigeria, it can simply be comprehended in the context of political economic calculations of individuals and groups. The established belief in all parts of Nigeria is that except one wins election or get appointed into leadership position, especially at the federal level, one remains perpetually a poor person. It is this belief that fuels individuals and groups quest for leadership positions within the country's federal arrangement.

Indeed, it has become fashionable to find individuals who do not have what it takes to win election, putting themselves up for different elective offices because they believe that at the end of the contest, they get rewarded by being appointed into one position or the other. This is at the core of the perennial threat to the existing social order when people employ all kinds of means including threat of violence to win elections or get their preferred choices through against all odds. The understanding that individuals become relevant only when they have their own in leadership position makes electoral politics dangerous in Nigeria.

Ake (1996) has likened image of electoral politics in Nigeria to warfare. Consequently, anomic political behaviour has become the norm rather than the exception. Otherwise, how else does one explain the post-election violence that characterized the Presidential election in Nigeria in April 2011?

Why would individuals go to the extent of employing the use of violence to promote their political aspiration in Nigeria? If the electorates prefer you to your opponent, why must you intimidate to get elected? Is election no longer the free choice of the electorate?

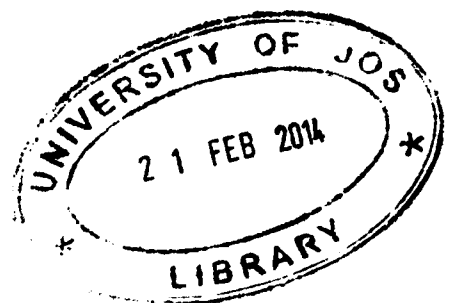
It is my considered view that the quest for material affluence is the key driving consideration for some politicians who are desperate for leadership positions. As we have noted earlier, politics is viewed by many in instrumental terms and this has to do with the belief that being in leadership position means having unlimited access to public resources. Many people in leadership positions get corrupt because of the influence of this societal belief on their perception of public office. It is no longer seen as a position of trust and when the element of trust is pushed to the background, public expectation, probity and accountability are compromised.

Concluding Remarks

We have contended in this paper that leadership in an organized political community like Nigeria is a critical imperative for maintaining law and order and also for improving the socio-economic and political wellbeing of the mass of the citizenry. As a resource, many people do aspire for leadership position and this leads them to employ all possible means to acquire it. In Nigeria, people get into leadership position through either election or appointment. We have noted that the path of election is particularly not favourable to the women folk not because they do not possess the requisite political skills and competence but more fundamentally because the process is more often than not, designed to marginalize and as much as possible, exclude them from contest for leadership in the society.

The means often employed by the male politicians are often viewed by the women folk as immoral and indecent. As a special interest group imbued with robust sense of morality, they deplore the use of such immoral means and would rather lose election than accepting the use of such immoral acts. Consequently, they have suffered gross underrepresentation, especially in elective offices.

We have also underscored the point that many people have different motivations for seeking leadership positions in Nigeria. More often than not, they mobilize ethno regional platforms to advance their interests against those of other competitors or in some cases, mobilize people's religious sensibilities to get appointed into leadership positions. In some cases, the option of pushing for the creation of more states to provide greater channels for accessing leadership positions is strongly canvassed. Unless Nigerians do away with the belief that only



through leadership position can individuals make it in life, the country will continue to witness underdevelopment because of the conflicting motivations of leadership position seekers with the expectations of the citizenry.

In the final analysis, Nigeria needs leaders who are sufficiently imbued with good sense of probity, responsibility, accountability, tolerance and accommodation. Above all, leaders who can rise above all parochial tendencies to cultivate a robust civic orientation that could unite Nigerians across all divide for the national project.

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